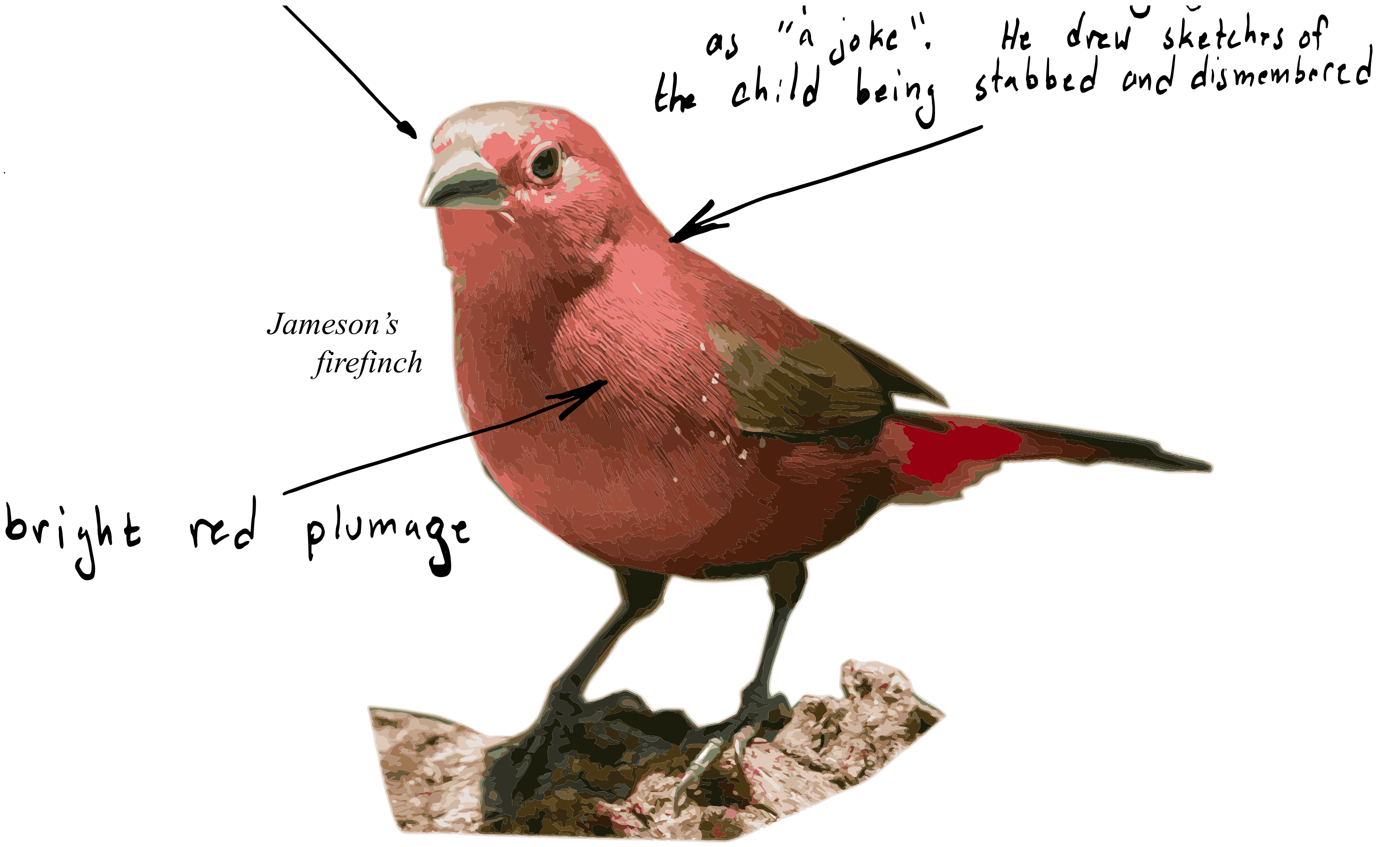
as "a joke". He drew sketches of the child being stabbed and dismembered
Jameson's firefinch
bright red plumage

The racist legacy many birds carry

The birding community faces a difficult debate about the names of species connected to enslavers, supremacists and grave robbers

By **Darryl Fears**

June 3, 2021

Corina Newsome is a Black ornithologist, as rare as some of the birds she studies.

When she joined Georgia Audubon last year, the group's executive director called her hiring a first step to "begin working to break down barriers" so that people from all communities can fully enjoy birding and the outdoors.

But overcoming those barriers will be daunting. As with the wider field of conservation, racism and colonialism are in ornithology's DNA, indelibly linked to its origin story. The challenge of how to move forward is roiling White ornithologists as they debate whether to change as many as 150 eponyms, names of birds that honor people with connections to slavery and supremacy.

The Bachman's sparrow, Wallace's fruit dove and other winged creatures bear the names of men who fought for the Southern cause, stole skulls from Indian graves for pseudoscientific studies that were later debunked, and bought and sold Black people. Some of these men stoked violence and participated in it without consequence.

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Even John James Audubon's name is fraught in a nation embroiled in a racial reckoning. Long the most recognized figure in North American birding for his detailed drawings of the continent's species, he was also an enslaver who mocked abolitionists working to free Black people. Some of his behavior is so shameful that the 116-year-old National Audubon Society — the country's premier bird conservation group, with 500 local chapters — hasn't ruled out changing its name. An oriole, warbler and shearwater all share it.

"I am deeply troubled by the racist actions of John James Audubon and recognize how painful that legacy is for Black, Indigenous and people of color who are part of our staff, volunteers, donors and members," interim chief executive Elizabeth Gray said in a statement in May. "Although we have begun to address this part of our history, we have a lot more to unpack."

For Newsome, community engagement manager for Georgia Audubon, the pain is real. When she first wore her organization's work shirt, "I felt like I was wearing the name of an oppressor," she said, "the name of someone who enslaved my ancestors."

She and other ornithologists of color deal with added layers of discomfort while doing research. Alex Troutman, a Black graduate student at Georgia Southern University, says he goes out of his way to smile and wave at every White passerby when he's in a marsh or field "to appear as least threatening as possible" and ease suspicions that he shouldn't be there.

Corina Newsome, an ornithologist and community engagement manager for Georgia Audubon, is pushing to make her profession more diverse and inclusive. (Nydia Blas for The Washington Post)

Ornithologist Olivia Wang, a graduate student at the University of Hawaii at Mānoa, says her field's troubling, racist past must be addressed. (Michelle Mishina for The Washington Post)

Offensive eponyms compound that sense of not belonging. Despite professional and amateur birding groups' declared commitment to diversity, only two names have been discarded.

The Townsend’s warbler and the Townsend’s solitaire still invoke John Kirk Townsend, whose journals detail his exploits in traditional Native Americans burial grounds in the West. Townsend, a Philadelphia-born ornithologist in the early 1800s, dug up and collected skulls for studies that sought to prove the inferiority of Indigenous people.

The Wallace’s owlet and five other birds honor Alfred Russel Wallace, a British naturalist, explorer and anthropologist credited, along with Charles Darwin, for conceiving the theory of evolution through natural selection. Wallace’s writings frequently used the n-word, including in reference to the “little brown hairy baby” he boasted about caring for after fatally shooting her mother during an 1855 trip to the Malay Archipelago. Some historians believe they were orangutans.

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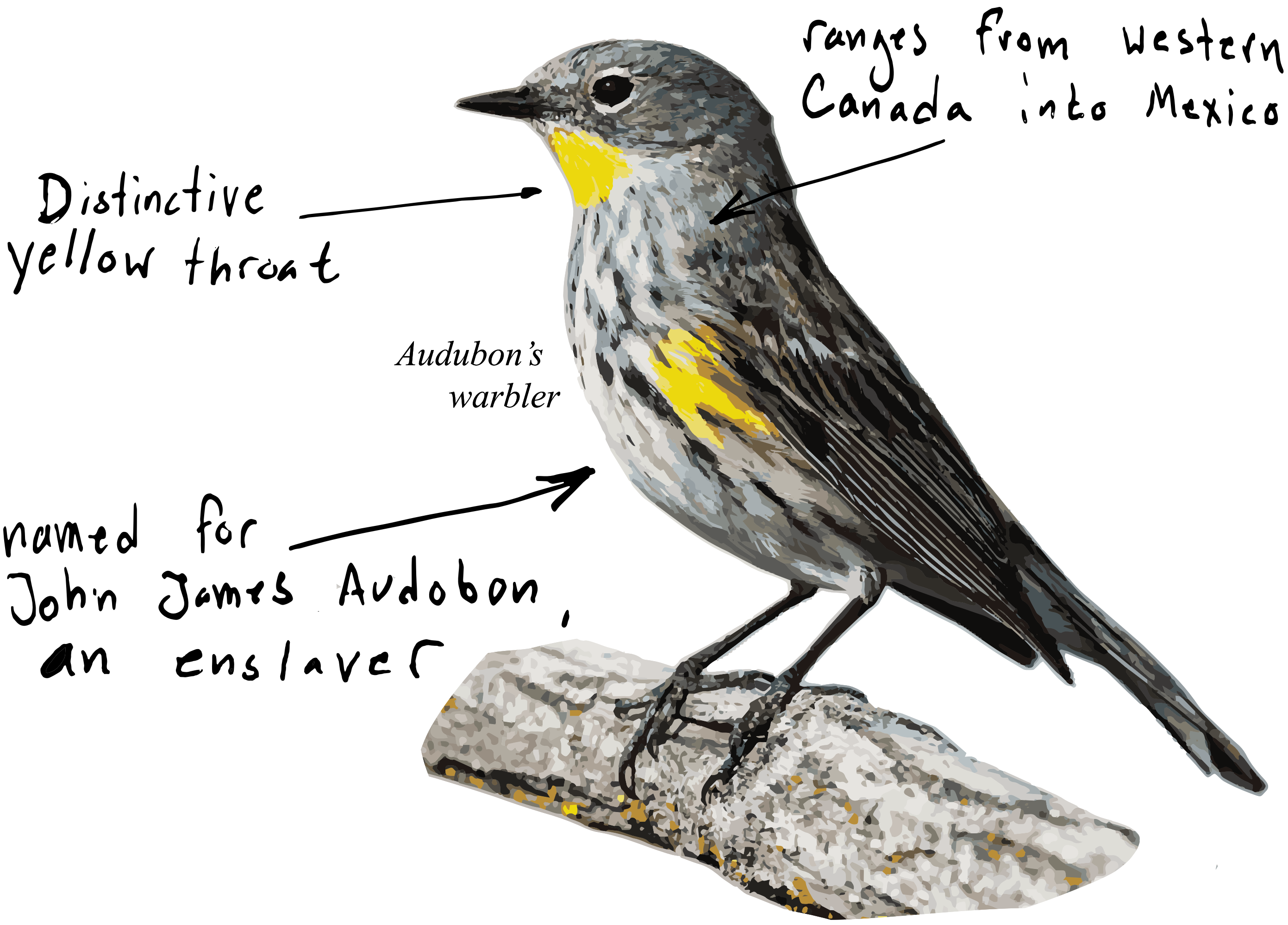
Three birds, including the crimson Jameson’s firefinch, are named after another British naturalist involved in a heinous act committed against a young girl he purchased as “a joke” in 1888 during an expedition in Africa. James Sligo Jameson wrote in his journal that the girl was then given to a group of natives described to him as cannibals. He drew sketches of the child being stabbed and dismembered.

“Conservation has been driven by white patriarchy,” said J. Drew Lanham, a Black ornithologist and professor at Clemson University in South Carolina, “this whole idea of calling something a wilderness after you move people off it or exterminate them and that you get to take ownership.”

Lanham views the issues as part of a much larger historic pattern, one connected to the White enslavers who renamed Africans kidnapped from that continent’s West Coast. “They renamed an entire people” — cancel culture on a global scale, he noted.

In Honolulu, ornithologist Olivia Wang is equally harsh. She regards the honorifics that birds carry with disdain.

“They are a reminder that this field that I work in was primarily developed and shaped by people not like me, who probably would have viewed me as lesser,” said Wang, an Asian American graduate student at the University of Hawaii. “They are also a reminder of how Western ornithology, and natural exploration in general, was often tied to a colonialist mind-set of conquering and exploiting and claiming ownership of things rather than learning from the humans who were already part of the ecosystem and had been living alongside these birds for lifetimes.”


ranges from western Canada into Mexico
Distinctive yellow throat
Audubon's warbler
named for John James Audobon, an enslaver

Indeed, White explorers, conservationists and scientists who crossed the world conveniently ignored the fact that birds had been discovered, named and observed by native people for centuries before their arrival.

To the Cherokee, eagles are the awâ'hili and crows are kâgû. The English common name for the chickadee is a butchered translation of the Cherokee name, tsïkïlïlï. Similar-sounding names for other birds that English speakers renamed or mispronounced are scattered throughout East Coast tribes.

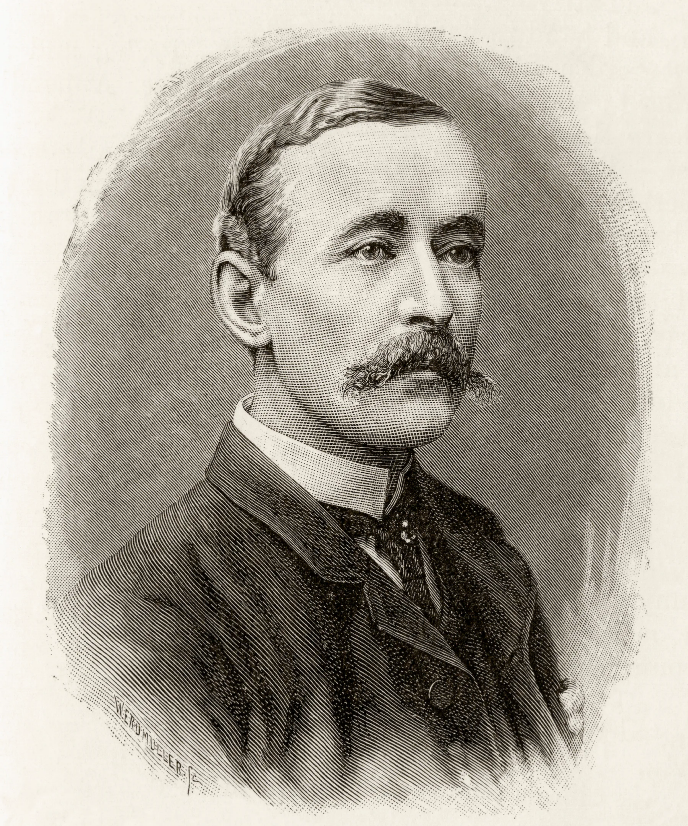
Europeans named birds as though they were human possessions, but American Indians regard them differently. The red-tail hawk in some languages is uwes' la' oski, a word that translates to "lovesick," because one of its calls sounded like a person who lost a partner.

"A whole lot of Native people, in thinking about birds, don't open a book of science. Their book of science is in the knowledge possessed by people in generations before them, the elders," said Shepard Krech III, a professor emeritus at Brown University and author of "Spirits of the Air."

Bird lovers have agitated to change eponyms linked to racists for several years but have encountered resistance.

It would cause confusion in the profession and among casual birders, opponents said. Books and ledgers would have to be revised, and people would have to learn new names. Only twice have such objections been overcome and the American Ornithological Society approved a switch. The first was for the oldsquaw, a species of waterfowl now known as the long-tailed duck. And last summer, the McCown's longspur became the thick-billed longspur — the first time a name with a Confederate past was dropped.

By then, a confrontation in New York City had linked race and birding in an ugly way. In May 2020, Christian Cooper, a Black birder in Central Park, was falsely accused of threatening behavior by a White woman who called police on him after he asked her to leash her dog.



An expedition to Africa in the late 1880s, during which a young girl was cruelly killed, forever stained naturalist James Sligo Jameson's reputation. (Universal History Archive/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

John James Audubon, long the most recognized figure in American birding, is now being reconsidered for his abhorrent views and actions against Black people during the early 1800s. (Bettmann Archive)

For the leaders of Audubon, the American Ornithological Society and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, among other groups, systemic racism had hit home.

At the same time, activists in the ranks were growing more aggressive in opposing the eponyms. One of the loudest voices was that of Jordan Rutter, a White co-founder of Bird Names for Birds. She wanted to upend the society committee that names a species and reconsiders historic names.

“White people are credited for discovering [the birds]. White people were the ones to name the birds after other White people. And White people are still the folks that are perpetuating these names,” Rutter said in a recent interview.

A decade ago, that same committee unanimously refused to rename the Maui parrotbill, criticizing the proposed kiwikiu as “contrived,” ridiculous and hard to pronounce. As part of last year’s awakening, activists sought an actual transcript of the debate but were denied. “I called out the AOS and NACC for censoring some racist and offensive comments the [committee] made when discussing the … proposal," Wang said, referring to the American Ornithological Society and its North American Classification Committee.

The society has since publicly apologized for those and other insensitive comments.

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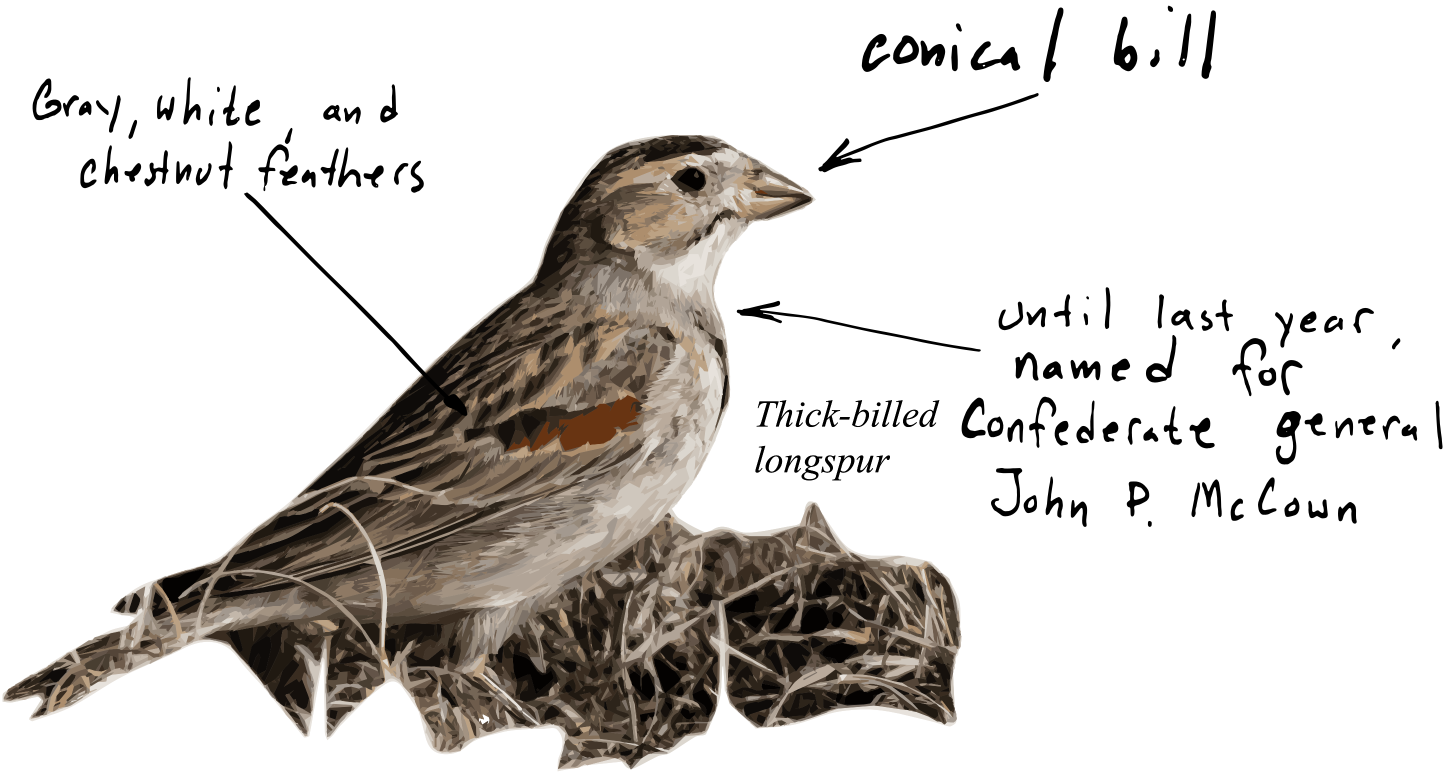
It is clear that leaders in the profession are listening more closely to the protests — and preparing to act. Audubon and the American Bird Conservancy, where Rutter works, have looked inward at their near-total lack of diversity and vowed to change. The American Ornithological Society pledged to "redoubl[e] our efforts toward making ornithology, birding, and access to the natural world equitable and inclusive."

This spring, society president Mike Webster announced that the internal group responsible for bird names will now be guided by an advisory committee composed of people of different backgrounds — although 13 of the 17 advisers are White and the ethnicities of the four others have not been identified.

The new panel is "not just because we want to feel good about ourselves," said Webster, who is White. "We see it [as] critically important to understanding and conserving birds. It's critically important that we have a diversity of people out there doing it."


conical bill
Gray, white, and chestnut feathers
until last year, named for Confederate general John P. McCown

Thick-billed longspur

A virtual panel discussion took place in April. Every major birding organization was represented, and 535 people joined from around the country as a majority of the panelists — nearly all of them White — agreed that it was time to move beyond racist eponyms.

Jeff Gordon, president of the American Birding Association, stressed that North America lost 3 billion birds over the past 50 years and that saving what's left will need people of every ethnicity and background to be involved. "The biggest threat birds face … [is] being ignored to death," he said. "Not enough people know and not enough people care."

There is no timeline for decisions about the worst eponyms, but the discussion seems unlikely to wane, given participants such as Rutter and Newsome. Within days of the incident in Central Park last year, Newsome helped organize a very public declaration dubbed Black Birders Week — an event that quickly became a viral movement. By happenstance, it took place amid nationwide demonstrations and calls for racial justice following George Floyd's death under the knee of a Minneapolis police officer.

The 28-year-old again took part in this year's Black Birders Week, which began last weekend. She is encouraged by ornithology's increasing focus on diversity and racism. She hopes it will soon extend to what the National Audubon Society and its chapters call themselves. "I believe they should both absolutely change the name. It feels wrong to enter African American communities … celebrating [Audubon's] name," she said. "It's a reality I am wrestling with constantly."

Yet far more progress is needed. Heads still turn when Newsome is in the field, observing birds. "I'm always questioned, in a seemingly friendly way, 'Oh, what are you doing out here?' "

On urban and rural trails, she quickly lifts her binoculars when she sees White people do a double-take. In a scorching Georgia marsh where she slogs through muck to study a seaside sparrow, she shifts heavy equipment to the side of her body that faces the roadway so suspicious White motorists "won't think I'm doing something illegal and make trouble for me."

Across the muddy water is the Brunswick neighborhood where Ahmaud Arbery, a Black jogger, was chased down and fatally shot in February 2020. Three White men have been indicted in the case. Newsome remembers driving past the neighborhood after the killing as she again headed toward the marsh.

"I felt like my soul couldn't take being there anymore," she said. "Like a Black person can't even be what they're called to be without encountering such violence."